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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENGDU 000228

SIPDIS

STATE PASS BROADCASTING BOARD OF GOVERNORS

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [VOA](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: TIBETAN MONKS SAY VOA BROADCASTS ARE INFORMATION LIFELINE

REF: (A)CHENGDU 117 (B) 08 CHENGDU 189 (C) 08 CHENGDU 30 (D) FBS2008121931718

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: Chengdu ethnic Tibetan LES (strictly protect) in early October spent a week at Labrang Monastery in Gansu Province, visiting family and senior monks -- including the chief religious tutor to the Beijing-recognized 11th Panchen Lama. The tutor did not have a picture of the young Panchen Lama among his large collection of photos of prominent monks, which included the Dalai Lama -- a clear sign that he does not think the Panchen Lama is legitimate. One monk said that earlier this year, a group of young monks destroyed the Chinese government-installed cable TV system in order to allow monks to install their own satellite dishes to watch Voice of America (VOA) television and access VOA and RFA audio channels on the satellite. The government and the monastery democratic management committee have decided not to intervene for now. Labrang monks invited to villages to chant prayers sometimes help villagers reorient their satellite dishes so they can watch VOA, the monks said. End Summary.

¶2. (S) In early October, Chengdu ethnic Tibetan LES visited Labrang Monastery in southern Gansu Province. Labrang is home to 1,200 registered monks and 2,000 unregistered monks of the Dalai Lama's Gelug school, and is the largest Gelug monastery in the Amdo region of traditional Tibet (Note: Amdo now consists of most of Qinghai Province, as well as portions of Gansu and Sichuan Provinces. End Note.). Chengdu LES was educated at Labrang as a lay student for nine years before attending Chinese schools. The monastery, because of its size and perhaps also because of the influence of its abbot, Jamyang Shepa, has preserved a greater margin of autonomy than medium and small monasteries in the Tibetan areas of China.

A Visit with the Beijing Panchen Lama's Religious Tutor

¶3. (S) Chengdu LES visited Jamyang Gyamtso, religious (tantric) tutor to the 11th (Beijing-recognized) Panchen Lama, at Labrang Monastery in early October. Gyamtso spends most of his time at the monastery and goes to Beijing only on special occasions. Gyamtso's own room and chapel are filled with pictures of other distinguished lamas, including a small picture of the Dalai Lama. Remarkably, although the Panchen Lama is the second most important lama in Tibetan Buddhism, there is no picture of his student, the Beijing-recognized Panchen Lama -- a clear sign

that he does not think the Panchen Lama is legitimate. Gyamtso said that all the monks have a strong wish for the Dalai Lama to return. Gyamtso said he stays well informed on the Dalai Lama and Dharamsala through visitors who have been to India and from what other monks tell him about what they have heard on VOA. When Chengdu LES told Gyamtso that he works at the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu, the lama said, "Your work is very important -- you must be dedicated and not allow yourself to be distracted."

14. (S) In a separate conversation with one of the leading monks in the monastery, Palden Gyamtso, tutor to the Seventh Gontang Tsang, the latest in a line of Gansu Tibetan re-incarnated lamas, told Chengdu LES that the statements of Chinese officials are not trustworthy and nobody can understand how they think.

VOA/RFA Broadcasts Widely Listened to in Tibetan Areas

15. (SBU) Time and again (refs A and B), Tibetan contacts have told us that they frequently listen to VOA and Radio Free Asia (RFA). The proliferation of inexpensive satellite dishes and receivers across China has made access to these broadcasts easier, although in some areas, such as Sichuan Province's Ganzi Prefecture, the local government has erected tall towers in an effort to jam satellite signals. Such jamming works in the case of satellite dishes, however, only for dishes within a few miles of and below the level of the jamming transmitters on the towers.

16. (S) The broadcasts are of particular importance at Labrang.

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Two monks discussed with Chengdu LES how earlier this year a group of monks objected to the government's destruction in October 2008 of satellite dishes monks used to watch VOA and Indian television programs. This was part of a two year old national campaign to remove many private satellite dishes and replace them with government-controlled cable systems (refs C and D). The group of monks completely destroyed the new satellite/cable TV system that the government had installed at the monastery. The group of monks then posted notices around the monastery saying that the government's action was intolerable and that they would "fight to the death" to prevent the re-installation of the government's cable TV system in the monastery. Many monks re-installed their own satellite dishes.

17. (S) The local government met with the Labrang Monastery Democratic Management Committee (DMC) to try to resolve the situation, but concluded that the DMC could not control the situation and so decided to take no action for now. One of the monks told Chengdu LES that there was an unconfirmed rumor that there was an organization among the monks named Danshe Tsugpa, which can be translated variously as "die for religion" or "forever dead." The two monks said that monks invited to pray at villages in religious ceremonies also sometimes helped villagers reorient their dishes and adjust their receivers so as to keep them constantly tuned to VOA.

18. (C) Over ten other monks whom Chengdu LES visited at Labrang showed him the satellite connections to their computers which allowing them to receive VOA TV and radio. The great majority of Labrang monks have such access, the monks said. They also

have software installed on their computers that enables them to defeat the Great Red Firewall and access websites blocked by the Chinese government and to listen to access online radio and TV broadcasts.

Information Gulf Widens Town-Monastery Political Divide

¶9. (S) The two monks said that the Tibetan language broadcasts of VOA were the most important source of information for Labrang's monks about the outside world. Chengdu LES noticed the monks had very recent information -- for example during his week-long stay, Tibetan monks were discussing President Obama's Nobel Peace Prize and the award of the Lantos Prize to the Dalai Lama. The two monks said that sometimes Tibetan cadres from the township government would visit friends at the monastery to get information about the outside world and the Tibetan government-in-exile not available from the Chinese media. Some monks say they listen to VOA so often that they understand the Lhasa dialect of Tibetan much better now. The two monks commented that the gap is widening between the township, which gets its information from Chinese Central Television on one side, and Labrang Monastery (and rural Tibetans who stand together with the monks), who get their information via VOA. Much more than before, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan situation are discussed at Labrang. While the differences between the monks at Labrang and the Tibetan cadres in the nearby township used to be merely differences between their respective religious and bureaucratic cultures, today the differences between the two are much more political, said the two monks.

Influential Broadcasts, Volatile Situation: Accuracy Essential

¶10. (C) Comment: Given the high credibility of VOA broadcasts among Tibetans and the unique information source these broadcasts provide, the extent to which Tibetans are willing to go to access the broadcasts, and the volatility of the Tibetan situation, it is essential that VOA broadcasts maintain the high standards of balance and accuracy they have shown to date. End Comment.

¶11. (U) This cable has been coordinated with Embassy Beijing.
BROWN